THE ROLE OF SHAME AS A MEDIATOR BETWEEN ANTI-BLACK RACIAL IDENTITY ATTITUDES AND NEGATIVE AFFECT IN A SAMPLE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

A sample of 168 African American undergraduates was surveyed to clarify past findings demonstrating a consistent relationship between endorsing negative attitudes about being African American and experiencing negative affect. Specifically, shame was tested as a mediator between participants' endorsement of preencounter attitudes (i.e., anti-Black attitudes) and both feelings of depression and global self-esteem, respectively. As predicted, shame acted as a complete mediator in both equations. Limitations and implications are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Personality theorists in recent decades have focused increasing attention on various aspects of African American personality and racial identity development (Baldwin & Bell, 1985; Parham & Helms, 1981; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998; Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, & Worrell., 2001). One of the major contributors to this area of research is William E. Cross, Jr. (1991), who proposed the theory of Nigrescence. Nigrescence theory attempts to explain how African Americans who experience racial oppression come to develop positive attitudes and identification with African American communities. Cross has formulated a series racial identity statuses instantiated by attitudes ranging from Black self-hatred (preencounter status) to Black pride and acceptance (immersion-emersion and internalization statuses; Cross, 1991; Vandiver et al., 2001).

Cross (1991) developed this theory as a response to the proliferation of research asserting that because African Americans are evaluated negatively by the dominant culture (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2002; Dovidio, 2001; Mendes, Blascovich, Lickel, & Hunter, 2002), they would internalize such attitudes (for reviews, see Baldwin, 1979; Banks, 1976; Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). Cross (1991) argued that the main studies upon which these theories were based were flawed because they failed to properly define self-concept (i.e., self-concept is a multifaceted construct consisting of both *personal identity* and *reference group orientation*). Thus, while personal identity is defined as those aspects of personality that are universal among

all humans and putatively independent of socialization (e.g., anxiousness, self-esteem, introversion-extroversion, etc.), reference group orientation is that aspect of persona fabricated by cultural scripts (e.g., gender, racial, and class identities). Nigrescence was a response to decades of conceptual synecdoche in which these facets of self-concept were assumed to represent the whole. Consequently, many studies operationalized African American self-concept by using either measures of personal identity or reference group orientation, but not both. This has resulted in confusion concerning the particular mechanism by which racial group orientation might be associated with both personal identity and psychopathology. The present study is an initial attempt to clarify this confusion.

Of most relevance to the current study is Cross's preencounter status. Although it has undergone several iterations, the consistent theme throughout these revisions has been that a core attitudinal stance of this status is one of Black self-hatred (Vandiver et al., 2001).

Preencounter Attitudes and Negative Affect

How are preencounter attitudes associated with negative psychological states? Carter (1991) found that "preencounter attitudes were significantly positively related to self-reported anxiety, memory impairment, paranoia, hallucinations, alcohol concerns, and global psychological distress" (p. 111). Munford (1994) and Pyant and Yanico (1991) found that preencounter attitudes appear to be positively correlated with depressive symptoms ($r = .33$ and $.38$, respectively).

Why would endorsing negative attitudes about one's reference group be associated with negative affect? Having an immutable, ascribed membership in a group one does not value would likely create a sense of dissonance in individuals. Such status incongruence has been linked empirically (Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985; Lundberg, Kristenson, & Starrin, 2009) and theoretically (Kaufman, 1996) to feelings of shame; however, research is lacking with regard to empirically examining the association of shame with preencounter attitudes Thus, the present study is a first step toward this end.

Shame and Negative Affect

What is shame? From the *pudor* (Kaster, 1997) of the Romans to the Chinese concept of *face* (Yau-fai Ho, 1976), shame has generally been defined as the feeling of wanting to disappear from view or hide from others (Lewis, 1987a; Tomkins, 1963), or as the experience of losing social attractiveness (Van Vliet, 2008).

How is shame associated with negative affect? Extensive theoretical (Kaufman, 1996; Lewis, 1987b) and empirical (De Rubeis & Hollenstein, 2009; Gilbert, McEwan, Bellew, Mills, & Gale, 2009) research supports a strong relationship between depressive affect and shame. The correlation between shame and depression has been found to range from .59 to .79 (Cook, 1994).

Preencounter Attitudes, Shame, and Depression

Shame and the preencounter stance both appear to tap heavily into themes of self-disaprobation; however, while shame is a global indictment of the self, preencounter attitudes represent a more circumscribed facet of shame (i.e., racial identity, rather than the whole self, is reproached). Further, while both shame and preencounter attitudes are associated with depressive symptoms, the correlation between shame and depression is generally much larger than that between preencounter attitudes and depression. Consequently, I hypothesized that shame would act as a mediator between the endorsement of preencounter attitudes and the experience of depressive affect.

Preencounter Attitudes, Shame, and Global Self-Esteem

The relationship of African American racial identity attitudes with global self-esteem is a complex one (Cross, 1991); however, past research has demonstrated a consistent negative correlation between endorsement of preencounter attitudes and self-esteem (Collins & Lightsey, 2001; Munford, 1994; Pyant & Yanico, 1991; Speight, Vera, & Derrickson, 1996).

With regard to the relation of shame with global self-esteem, research has consistently demonstrated a strong negative correlation between these variables (Brown & Marshall, 2001; Thompson, Sharp, & Alexander, 2008; Yelsma, Brown, & Elison, 2002). However, Cook (1994) asserts that while low levels of self-esteem ought to be associated with increasing experience of shame, low levels of shame are not necessarily indicative of higher self-esteem. Working from this theory, shame and global self-esteem would likely be more strongly associated with each other than either would be with preencounter attitudes. Why? If Cross's (1991) definition of self-concept is correct, then shame and global self-esteem are both facets of the common superordinate construct of personal identity. Conceptually, this suggests a much stronger relation between these variables. Contrastingly, preencounter attitudes are part of the reference group construct, and therefore ought to be related to, but more distal from, personal identity.

Finally, why place shame as a mediator between preencounter attitudes and global self-esteem rather than reversing this relationship (i.e., placing self-esteem as a mediator between shame and preencounter attitudes)? Assuming that shame and self-esteem are subsumed under a common construct of personal identity, then this begs the question: How are preencounter attitudes associated with personal identity? Intuitively, the answer appears to lie in the fact that both shame and preencounter attitudes tap into a general negative self-evaluation construct (i.e., there is no affectively "positive" aspect to the endorsement of either stance). However, global self-esteem has both negative and positive qualities (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, Rosenberg, 1995). Thus, if we accept Cook's (1994) assertion that shame represents the negative side of global self-esteem, and we remember that in Cross's (1991) theory preencounter attitudes reflect a negative evaluation of being Black, then the logical link become clear: shame bridges the gap between preencounter attitudes and self-esteem through the theme of negative self-evaluation.

To review, the specific hypotheses of this study are as follows:

Hypothesis 1: Shame was expected to mediate the relationship between preencounter attitudes and depression.

Hypothesis 2: Shame was expected to mediate the relationship between preencounter attitudes and global self-esteem.

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

A sample of 168 African American students (95 women, 72 men, 1 no sex reported) was recruited at a large Midwestern university. Average age was 20.92 (SD = 3.65; range 17 – 39). The mediation hypotheses proposed in this study were tested using the method proposed by Frazier, Tix, and Barron (2004).

Measures

In addition to filling out a consent form and a brief demographic questionnaire, participants completed the following measures:

The Black racial identity attitude scale (RIAS)

This 50-item scale was created to measure African American participants' endorsement of various racial identity related statements using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale (Helms & Parham, 1996). For the present study, we restrict our interest to the preencounter subscale. Items from the 18-item preencounter subscale tap themes related to seeing Black people as untrustworthy, less intelligent than Whites, failures, and coming from an uncivilized continent. Total scores are calculated by summing the appropriate subscale items. Higher scores are indicative of greater endorsement of the measured construct, and vice versa.

Center for epidemiologic studies depression scale (CESD)

This 20-item scale measures the affective elements of depressive symptomatology for both normal and clinical populations by asking respondents to rate (0=none of the time to 3=most of the time) their experiences of happiness, helplessness, guilt, hopelessness, etc. during the past week (Radloff, 1977). Responses are summed to yield a total score, with higher scores indicating more depressive symptoms.

Internalized shame scale (ISS)

Cook's (1994) shame scale consists of 24 shame-related items. Respondents rate how often they feel small, unimportant, not good enough etc. using a scale from zero (never) to four (almost always). Scale items are summed to produce a total score, with higher scores indicating greater internalized shame.

This measure also includes a 6-item global self-esteem scale utilizing the same 0 to 4 rating options. This measure assesses participants' overall feelings of self-worth, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem.

RESULTS

Before conducting the analyses for this study, the data were reviewed to assure accurate entry, account for missing values, and ensure that the distribution of the data fit with the basic assumptions of multivariate analysis. Intercorrelations, alpha coefficients, means, and standard deviations are provided for the key variables of this study in Table 1.

Table 1

Intercorrelation between the four key variables of this study.

	Self-Esteem	CESD	Shame	Preencounter Attitudes
Self-Esteem	**.84**	-.36***	-.47***	-.17*
CESD		**.88**	.72***	.39***
Shame			**.94**	.43***
Preencounter Attitudes				**.76**
Mean	19.64	15.08	24.83	35.83
SD	3.91	9.80	17.07	8.11

Note. Alpha coefficients are listed in bold the diagonal. N ranged from 167 to 168.
CESD = Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale.
*p < .05. *** p < .001.

Hypothesis 1

The first prediction of this study (i.e., that shame would mediate the relationship between preencounter attitudes and depression) was supported. Specifically, when two separate simple regression equations were used to regress ISS (shame) scores (see Table 2, Step 1) and CESD (depressive symptoms) scores (see Table 2, Step 2) on preencounter scores; both regressions were significant. Further, the third regression equation in testing for mediation (i.e., regressing CESD scores on both preencounter and ISS scores simultaneously) also yielded significant results in support of a mediating relationship, (see Table 2, Step 3). Because the variance explained by preencounter scores in Step 3 was significantly less than that observed in Step 2 (see Table 2), these findings indicate that ISS scores mediate the relationship between preencounter and CESD scores (Sobel's z=6.2, p < .001).

Table 2

Regressions Utilized to Assess the Role of Shame as a Mediator Between Preencounter Attitudes and Depressive Symptoms.

Steps in Regression Tests for Mediation	Variables Entered	B(SE)	Standardized Beta
Step 1			
Outcome:	Shame scores		
Predictor:	Preencounter scores	.67(.11)	.43***
Step 2			
Outcome:	CESD		
Predictor:	Preencounter	.43(.08)	.39***
Step 3			
Outcome:	CESD		
Mediator:	Shame scores	.47(.04)	.68***
Predictor:	Preencounter scores	.11(.06)	.10

Note. CESD=Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale.
*** p < .001.

Hypothesis 2

Shame was hypothesized to mediate the relationship between preencounter attitudes and self-esteem. Having already established a significant relationship between ISS and preencounter subscale scores (see previous paragraph and Table 3, Step 1), we can move directly to testing the second equation for demonstrating mediation. As expected, self-esteem scores were significantly related to preencounter scores (see Table 3, Step 2). Further, as with Hypothesis 1, the third equation in testing for mediation also yielded significant results. Specifically, when shame and preencounter attitudes were both simultaneously regressed on self-esteem scores (see Table 3,Step 3), the size of the regression coefficient between self-esteem and preencounter scores was significantly less in Step 3 compared to Step 2 (Sobel's z=4.61, p < .001), demonstrating that shame acts as a mediator between preencounter attitudes and self-esteem.

Table 3

Regressions Utilized to Assess the Role of Shame as a Mediator Between Preencounter Attitudes and Self-Esteem.

Steps in Regression Tests for Mediation	Variables Entered	B(SE)	Standardized Beta
Step 1			
Outcome:	Shame scores		

Predictor:	Preencounter scores	.67(.11)	.43***
Step 2			
Outcome:	Self-Esteem		
Predictor:	Preencounter	-1.43(.67)	-.17*
Step 3			
Outcome:	Self-Esteem		
Mediator:	Shame scores	-2.69(.66)	-.49***
Predictor:	Self-Esteem scores	.38(.66)	.04

*p < .05. *** p < .001.

DISCUSSION

As predicted, shame mediated the relationship between preencounter attitudes and both feelings of depression and global self-esteem, respectively. These findings suggest that shame is a key component of the preencounter status of Nigrescence, and that future research assessing the association of Nigrescence with psychopathology may benefit from the inclusion of this variable. Further, if the present models are correct, they have implications for clinicians working with African American college students who endorse feelings of depression and anti-Black attitudes concomitantly. For example, while past studies have demonstrated a consistent and clear correlation between endorsing anti-Black attitudes and negative psychopathology, recent work suggests that endorsing more favorable attitudes about being African American is associated with better mental health (Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, & Ragsdale, 2009; Settles, Pagano, Abdou, & Sidanius, 2010). Thus, at first blush, it might appear that an obvious point of intervention with African Americans evincing conjoint symptoms of depression and anti-Black attitudes would be to combat these negative attitudes by kindling feelings of racial pride. However, the present study suggests a less direct, but potentially equally powerful, third point of intervention: reducing feelings of general shame. Addressing issues of shame might also precipitate an increase in self-esteem with such clients.

While this study is a valid exploration of this area of inquiry, it has some limitations. For example, these findings need replication with non-college samples, and with alternate measures of racial identity (e.g., Sellers et al., 1998; Vandiver et al., 2001). Also, because there is no single experience of racial identity and not all African Americans have internalized a negative view of being Black, the present findings are likely most applicable to those depressed or low self-esteem individuals exhibiting both preencounter attitudes and shame. Finally, because this research is preliminary and correlational, future research should consider the role of additional mediators in explaining the present findings.

Despite these limitations, this is a valid study of these questions and offers significant insight into the affective components of the preencounter status.

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